

who is in love with his new castle in the sky

Artist Philip Slein just can't get enough of his spacious loft apartment on Washington Avenue.

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Philip Slein lives above the store. That's not absolutely precise, but in this article there's room for literary license, because in it we're discussing an artist and a building which have intricate connections with art.

Philip Slein is the artist; the building is a renovated 8-story structure at 1627 Washington Avenue downtown. Slein lives in a loft on the fifth floor. Most days, he takes the elevator downstairs, where he works as director of the Des Lee Gallery on the first floor.

Slein, 32, was the first person to move into the building, leading a group of tenants which snapped up all 26 of the loft apartments in the 8-story, 93-year-old building.

Originally called the Drygoodsman, 1627 Washington Avenue for many years was owned by Washington University, which was at one time a major landowner downtown. In the mid-1990s, it caught the eye of W. Patrick Schuchard, a professor in the School of Fine Arts and head of the painting department.

Loft

Downtown resident loves his new home

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he said. Rents for these units are about \$400-\$500. The market-rate units go for \$950 to \$1,250 a month.

"When I heard about this building, I was so excited," Slein said with apparently indefatigable enthusiasm.

He'd been living in University City, and while he appreciated the ambiance of that close-in suburb and the hustle and bustle of the Loop, the ever-brighter lights downtown were seductive.

"To get this kind of space, and to be able to live in a community of artists, well, it's just wonderful," Slein said.

This kind of space is an L-shaped loft apartment big enough for Slein and his ample cat, Jackson. Although Slein's apartment is one of the smaller units in the building, it has an embarrassment of riches in windows. Three full bays look out on to Washington Avenue, and from them you can see an urban renaissance unfolding. Then, looking over the rooftops into the distance, the trees of Lafayette Square present themselves. The generous fenestration prompts a visitor to imagine the space as limitless.

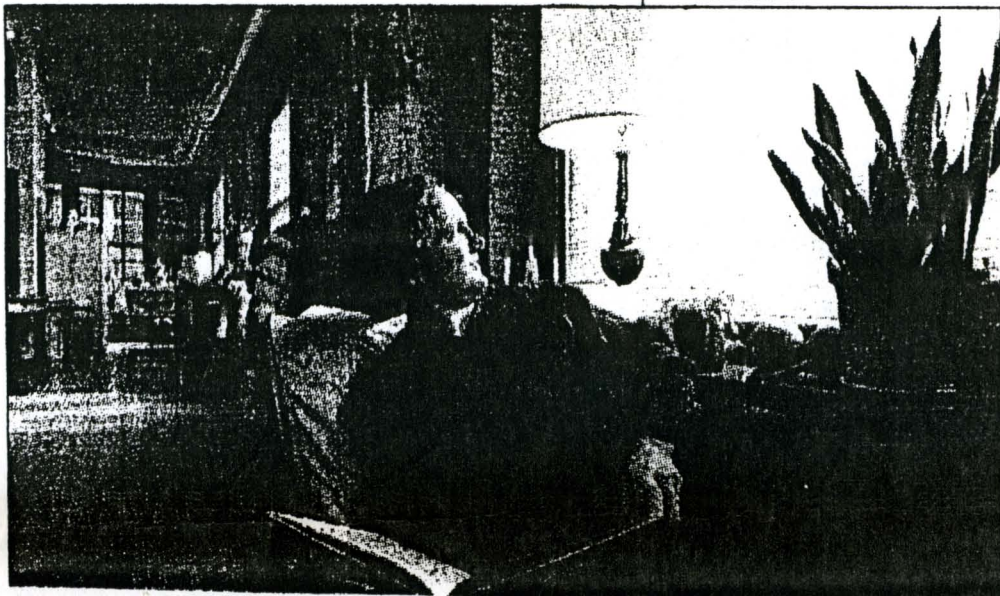
ter of the E. Desmond Lee professor for community collaboration. When he was named to that position, he made a speech, and in it he noted an observable out-migration of creative young men and women from St. Louis.

"We need to ask ourselves," he wrote, "why these young people are moving to cities like Seattle, Chicago and Minneapolis. The transformative power of art is evident in the degree of real or perceived civic vitality in some of these cities. These are good places because they have good art, which means they have good artists living and working and, by extension, participating in civic life."

Schuchard was able to translate that question into the ambitious, multimillion dollar renovation of the Drygoodsman, which was reborn in January as the University Lofts.

The renovation was accomplished through the collaboration of Washington University; the Bank of America Midwest (which provided financing); the not-for-profit Regional Housing and Community Development Alliance, which owns and manages apartments and helps other not-for-profit developers; and through the purchasing of state and federal historic renovation tax credits.

Those tax credits bring us back to Phil Slein.



Artist Philip Slein relaxes in his fifth-floor loft home at 1627 Washington Avenue in downtown. He commutes to work by taking the elevator to the Des Lee Gallery, on the first floor.

Most of the apartment is spread out behind the Washington Avenue facade of the building, but at 16th Street, the space turns left, and tucked into a room that faces 16th Street is the studio where Slein paints his big abstract pictures.

Hanging in the company of Slein's luscious-surfaced paintings are works by a number of St. Louis artists. Slein, like Pat Schuchard, has a commitment to keeping talent in town. In addition to his job downstairs from his loft, he runs the gallery at St. Louis Community College at Forest Park, where he has mounted show after show of emerging St. Louis painters and sculptors.

For many of these artists, the Forest Park shows are their first exhibitions in a real gallery. For many, such shows are tickets to reviews, and perhaps a place in one of the commercial galleries in town. Slein brought his concern for local art with him, where he plans to emphasize the work of St. Louis artists in the Des Lee Gallery, along with artists of national reputations.

Basement art

The artistic activity that vibrates throughout the above-ground floors of the building continues underground. In the basement of the building, there is a huge space Slein says is available for exhibitions, meetings, performance rehearsals — anything that has to do with making a good place to make art in St. Louis.

"I'm as local as you can get," Slein said with a laugh.

He was reared in St. Louis County, and went to the University of Missouri at Columbia, and studied art. After graduating in 1994, he came to Washington U. for graduate school in the School of Fine Arts, from which he received a master's degree in 1996.

Although he holds two appointments running galleries for schools, he says, "Phil is not only the gallery guy. Phil is also the painter."

He's also something of a one-man chamber of commerce for the community where he lives.

The University Lofts building is great, he says, and he talks about terrific neighbors who are neighborly and interesting but not intrusive. Printmaker Tom Huck, who has a show coming at the St. Louis Art Museum, lives next door. Huck prints are on Slein's walls. So is a portrait of Slein by Jim Rose. There's also work by present and former St. Louis artists such as Eric Spehn, Andy Millner and John Sarra. Phil's sister, photographer Alison Slein, is represented; so is his former teacher at Mizzou, Frank Stack.

Although he lives and works in the building, other business takes him outside and into the city. Catty-corner from the University Lofts is Gold's Gym, where he works out. There's a cleaners two blocks away. He walks to Rams games. "When Big Mac cracks one, I can hear the fireworks," he said. The nights are quiet from Sunday to Wednesday on Washington; the activity's intense Thursday through Saturday.

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He likes the quiet; he likes the racket, too. All that's missing is a full-service grocery, but with Highway 40 (Interstate 64) a minute away, the Hanley Schnucks fills that need quite adequately, Slein said. And for food emergencies, there is the Bodega just down the street.

"We need a blend of folks"

Finding something he doesn't like about downtown dwelling is the head-scratcher in this narrative, but worries emerge in conversation with the artist who lives above the store. There's gentrification, which runs small businesses, poor people — and artists out of transitional neighborhoods. He recognizes that small businesses and poor people and artists — either out of need or through their adventurousness and because of a willingness (or resignation) to put up with everything from bugs to stingy landlords who "forgot" to turn on the heat — allowed Washington Avenue to survive and then to go cool.

"That's why this building is so important. We need a blend of folks downtown. We need the artists, but artists need rich people too," he said.

Looking out his big windows, looking at his big cat who was taking a snooze on the kitchen table, looking around at the art that climbs up his walls leaving few spaces unfilled, a visitor gets that clear impression that here is a man clearly in love with his castle.

"I am so lucky," he said, "to have gotten in here."